35 ~ 55'

Notes on the podium.

SOCIETY OF DANCE HISTORY SCHOLARS CONFERENCE
DANCE DRAMATURGY: catalyst, perspective, and memory
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Key-Note address.

THE ROLE OF THE DRAMATURGE: THE PRACTICAL NECESSITIES

This address has been styled to be spoken and not to lie silent on the page. I will speak of the reality of the work of the dance dramaturge in all its complexity from my point of view as a practitioner.

My dance life has spanned many dance forms - Interpretive Dance, Modern Dance, Post-Modern Dance, New Dance, Contemporary Dance and Dance for Physical Theatre. I have always tried to step up to the developing mutations as I, and the dance form, have evolved. The coming together of the defined and refined physical body and the power of self-expression - all that is what attracted me to dance in the first place and I consider myself forever contemporary.

In my professional career in Contemporary Dance and Physical Theatre, I am dedicated to the survival of my creativity and to the protection of the same privilege for all.

Therefore the principle thrust, in my many years of working with students and professionals, has been to provide the necessary environment in which they can express in movement what they want to express.

My work has been mostly with dancer artists on original creations. As we all know, in the creating of an original work there is no right or wrong - it is just what is. We also know that in our society today it is difficult to find clarity, courage and a voice to develop and expose creative work. But it is a precious thing and needs honest, positive support.

Working as a dance dramaturge for the last thirty years has given me the opportunity to continually refine my knowledge, understanding and sensitivity. At the same time, I have been able to form a practical definition of the role.

The work of the dance dramaturge is to contribute by rending aid to individuals in the community and, in doing so, assist the dance artists to produce their most personally creative, satisfying and successful work. The work is solely involved in the product not the process. The dance dramaturge's place is (but only temporarily) between the creator/performer and the future audience. The position demands immense trust. It is the work for a mature and

experienced artist whose own creative life has been and continues to be personally fulfilling.

It is also important to be able to recognize, or at least sense, what makes potent theatre - dance and/or text driven. In my mind, the question has come down to what is enough? Not enough is not good theatre and too much is also not good - I call that "mallet" theatre. Although I have found the answer kind of mysterious and difficult to express in words, and differs for different people, when one is sitting in the audience, one knows when one has experienced it. good theatre.

Definitions generate rules / directives - a foundation on which can be built a strong work ethic and clear responsibilities. But a foundation is of no importance until it is used as a base for some adventurous work.

I am now going to go through my list of rules of engagement / directives. There are some for the dance artist and some for the dance dramaturge - some when they are alone and some when they are together. But please keep in mind that, at the same time, I sincerely acknowledge that, working with each individual dance artist and each work requires a unique formula. This should be shaped by the needs of the dance

artist, the condition of the work, and the time line for studio meetings before the ~~premier~~ showing.

The first rule is for the dance artist and is about choosing a suitable dance dramaturge. I take for granted that they are seeking an opportunity to develop their best possible work and not just to be saved from some disaster. They should determine what aid they think would assist them and what growth and development is needed to bring their work to performance level. Therefore they should give serious thought to the choosing because it can make or damage their work. If they are seeking just to be complimented and pamper, they can leave the work to a mother or a friend - no need for a professional. But because this work needs a serious relationship, the candidate should be experienced, mature and creatively fulfilled and therefore be able to intellectually assist without jealously become possessive.

The second directive is for the dance dramaturge. There is a necessary transition to be made from thinking like a choreographer, performer or teacher into thinking like a dance dramaturge. All the knowledge gleaned, working in the other roles, is utilized but a different set of rules must be applied. The concentration has to go complete off the self onto the other.

The third important point to consider is communication. It should be fluid between the dance artist and the chosen dance dramaturge. In some cases, there is already a relationship of sorts so it only must be gauged if the relationship can move into a more serious studio one. If it involves a brand new connection, before a serious commitment is made, communication must be tested – not necessarily on a profound level but must involve giving and receiving, speaking and, most importantly, listening.

In the early days if an error in choosing has been made, one or the other or both parties should decided to honestly withdraw. Honesty is sometime difficult but not as difficult as finding oneself in the studio trying to work in a non-communicating and/or an incompatible relationship.

Let us now presume that, after consideration, the dance artist and the dance dramaturge have decided that they can work in the delicate, demanding, sensitive relationship that is required for progress if not success.

The fourth set of rules has to do with being together in the first studio meeting. It is crucial that the dance artist can run the work, even if it is still in a rough state, from beginning to

end without pause and preferable without explaining content or purpose. If the content is explained, the information will color the pure act of expressive projection and, being only human, I, as a dance dramaturge, cannot forget it and will see the work expressing or not expressing the content and, while I am still mindful of the preliminary content, it may change as the refining process continues. In the beginning, I should experience the work as an audience member without program notes.

It is also important, in the early stages, for me to identify the general conventions of the work – the style, the physical vocabulary, and perhaps the limitations ~~and the possibilities~~ – if not there is no base to rest my thinking on. If the work is long and/or complicated, several runs should be offered. With alert concentration and note taking, I can then begin to know the work, read its conventions, receive what is being projected, and start to realize where and how aid can be given.

After the viewings, with a balance of ego and humility, the dance artist should be willing to let their work stand without commenting, apologizing or regretting – it was what it was – if it was perfect there would be no need for a dance dramaturge.

The next step is for the dance dramaturge to initiate the all-important level of communication. The best procedure is with questions inviting positive reflection. As was previously mentioned, the situation is sensitive and delicate and this moment marks the beginning of the real work.

This is also the time when the dance dramaturge begins to gauge the degree at which enquiries can be made and discussions can be conducted. Productivity can be achieved with many levels of directness from gentle to strong, from subtle to obvious, and all degrees in between. But eventually the discussions should not leave any moment of the work compromised by a lack of courage in the dance dramaturge or the dance artist. A tall order.

The next rules, which are the fifth, apply to the time of separation after the first studio session when both parties must do some serious thinking. There may still be time for either or both to discontinue the relationship if they cannot see good coming out of it. After the second session, it is difficult and time consuming to disengage and for the dance artist to find a replacement. It is also a time when the confidence of the dance artist needs to be at its strongest and there should be nothing, like incorrect judgment, to undermine it.

Presuming that the relationship is to continue, the dance dramaturge needs to consider how to proceed in the relationship. During the time of separation, I do seriously not think about the work. I, as a dance dramaturge, must not involve my creative ability even in imagining what I believe is even the potential of the work. I should not develop opinions, have ideas, make judgment or feel any kind of possessiveness toward the work. It is not my work - my work is to aid the artist in expressing exactly what they want to express in their work. I must leave no creative imprint.

It does take deep, disciplined concentration to not think about the work. There is a zone that I go to when I am alone and also when I am in the studio with the dance artist - I call it my ignorant/audience zone and over the years I have found it a useful and interesting place. When I am alone, it is not so difficult to disconnect, but, when I am in the studio, I must become empty, alert and open to receive whatever is presented.

But even though I do not think about the work, I do give a great deal of thought to my relationship with the dance artist. How did it feel in the studio? What created comfort and developed respect and trust? What might have created

discomfort? How valuable was the discomfort? Should I back off slightly or move in and risk stronger questioning? Did we laugh and/or cry? How was it when we parted? How should it develop when we meet again? How to draw out the creator so that they say what they need to hear? (that being more important than me hearing it). How to bring the dancer artist closer to their goal? What are the questions that the dancer artist is not asking her/him self? There are lots and lots of questions for myself.

At this point I would like to divert for a moment. Although I realize that no artistic community, based in any discipline, is perfect, I cannot but worry sometimes about the lack of authentic communication amongst some of our members and the problems that many choreographers and dancers have when offered critical feedback. Although critical feedback is far from the work of a dance dramaturge, I cannot miss this opportunity to speak about my concern and it does deal with the subject of communication.

From dance training to auditioning, our profession encourages competitiveness beginning with many teaches who reward the students who have the widest reach and the highest jump. Images in the mirror reinforce the facts. Being sensitive creatures, the discomfort experienced by many

dancers can encourage envy and jealousy. Also, the body for life and the body for dance art making is the same body, and most members of our community are not taught to separate the work from the self. We realize that this is a very complex idea to realize. But without it, critical feedback is often taken as a personal attack.

Many a time a student came into my office requesting feedback. I always asked, "Do you want feedback or praise?" Although they insisted on getting feedback, as it was being voiced, the expression on their face told me that what they really wanted was praise. We, working at all levels in the dance community, should be attentive to the emotional frailties as well as the strengths that dancers develop and be attentive in building a balanced environment for everybody. If positive criticism and feedback were an integral part of a dancer's life from the early years, I do believe that generally they and their work would be realistically stronger. Therefore, although the dance dramaturge is not a critic or a giver of feedback, their work is another phase in ongoing and developing communication.

I will now return to the work of the dance artist and their dance dramaturge and the sixth rule. Seeing that the dance artist has been rehearsing the work and I have not been

thinking about it, each following session should have newness in it for me.

What is it that I am alertly ready to register? Firstly, it is the energy coming off the work. There must not be a moment when the ~~projected~~d energy drops out. I call it "the erg thread" that must run from the beginning to the end. Its gradation can go from thick to thin from dense to shallow, but it must never break. At the same time, I am watchful to see that there is no lack of internal connection to the outward expression because that could invite dullness in the physicality. All this takes for granted that there is not one atom of movement "filler".

There are other elements that are to be given some attention or just kept in my mind. There is spacing, pulse beat and over-rhythm, viewing angles, exits and entrances, general structure, duration, relationship to sound or silence, costume or nudity, mode of expression, focus, phrasing, transitions - all or some of which can be adding to or detracting from the power of the work.

I don't work through the items one by one but I do look for moments of weakness and ask myself why are they happening? What is the cause? Then I must find a way to

encourage the dance artist to re-examine all the problem moments and ask them to sense if they are all that they want them to be. If the dance artist's perception is clouded, I may suggest ways that could be considered. Suggesting one way could be on the verge of being interference but many ways offer optional routes to problem solving. Reminding myself again to go to my disciplined mode of behavior, I remind myself that it is not my work. My work is to assist and support while the dance artist refines their product.

Early on I spoke about not wanted to know the content - wanting to be as an audience member with no program notes. But eventually the content is revealed to me through the dance artist's deepening expression and the many repetitions of the work that I observe. I cannot stay ignorant forever. But, until then, I try to insist that no verbal description of the content is told to me.

By this time, as the work periods progress, the studio relationship should have develop into one in which each person should be able to safely risk upping the intensity, precision and direction of the exchanges. This should be the natural development if respect and trust have deepened in the relationship. And also by this time, the overall structure,

physical expressivity, space use and visuals have all been examined and integrated into a cohesive whole.

The next rule (the 7th) is about time and I will consider it in reverse beginning with the day before the premier. Under perfect circumstances, no changes should be made in the work during the lasts days before the ~~first~~ performance – lets say five days. This gives the performer/s time to run and to claim the work and integrate their total being into the projection of what is to be expressed. Solo performance carries a heavy responsibility but ensemble work has the added need of connecting and projecting a unified and balanced meaning. Just prior to the five days in studio rehearsals, it must be realized just how much more can be discussed and digested before the processing goes into overload and becomes full of impossibilities. If new considerations are discovered and there is not enough time for acknowledgement, digestion and realization, they should not even be contemplated or introduced. If time is running out, it must be decided that as much work on the piece that can be done has been done. There must be a logical point in time when development is stopped and all the attention is given to refinement.

There is also the time when the work has to be moved from the studio environment to the performance space. This demands a total re-evaluation of the energy, focus, spacing and intensity of projection. If it is moving onto a proscenium arch stage or a thrust one or into a sit-specific environment, there are many factors to consider to recreate the potency of the work that has become familiar to the performer/s in an enclosed space with four walls ~~and usually a low ceiling~~.

At this time, I would like to address choreographers who don't perform in their own works. It is totally understandable that they learn through the creating and rehearsing of their work but there is a point, when they should stop making changes. This, of course, relates to those five days that I have already marked for the caste to claim, transfer the work and re-evaluate the elements.

As an interpreter, when I was given changes in the last days or, as has happened, just before a performance, my concentration was then on the changes and not on expressing the work. It also made me nervous. During those last days, the choreographer, with consideration and discipline, should resist making changes and accept the work as it is and keep the late learning private and stowed away to be used on their next project. As a dance

dramaturge working with choreographers, I have introduced this notion and it has had some success but old habits die slowly.

There are equally defined rules for choreographers who perform their solo works or become one of their own ensemble members. It is of major importance that they pass through the transition from being the choreographer to being the interpreter. For soloists it is not so difficult because, as the creator, developer and performer of the work, it is all an intimate process. The dance dramaturge, in a slightly altered role, can assist them through the necessary transitions and prepare them for opening night. But the choreographer, who becomes a member of their own ensemble, has many difficulties to overcome. Firstly, they are usually under-rehearsed because they cannot give up being in the outer place of creation and control. Secondly, they resist giving up the need to observe while rehearsing. Also when the choreographer transitions into being an interpreter, the other caste members must adjust themselves to the unfamiliar energy. Therefore, there can be a serious need to re-evaluate the energy environment of the newly formed ensemble.

If the dance dramaturge is still working on the project when the choreographer becomes an ensemble member, their role can become dramatically altered. Seeing that there must be a knowable observing-eye to bring the work to a satisfactory conclusion, they can find themselves fulfilling the role of rehearsal director.

And what, while considering "the eye" is the role of the out-side-eye, which is often confused with that of the dramaturge? I think that it came out of the realization that performance works can only be completely experienced by the performer when there is a public viewing - an audience of some kind. It is a testing and does feed the performer with information of a kind that cannot be got any other way.

So all these different kinds of work, that of dance dramaturge, rehearsal director, observing eye, out-side eye, have particular roles to fulfill and accumulatively help the dance artist's productions.

To conclude, I would like to say that I find personal satisfaction when the dance artists feel in total ownership of their work, and feel that it has been accomplished and presented to the best of their ability and to their satisfaction. The gratifying time for me is when I am sitting in the

audience, see the work and share the audience's interest, enthusiasm and pleasure. But the most gratifying for me is the knowledge that the dance artist and I will continue to communicate and gain from our experiences.

Thank you.

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